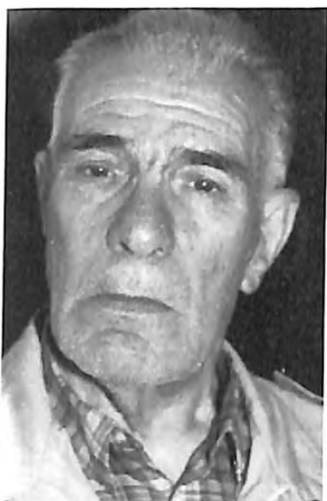


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*Nisim NAVONOVIC*

## FROM CAPTIVITY TO CAPTIVITY



**N**isim Navonović was born in Pristina on September 3, 1921, to Gavrijel and Estera (née Baruh). He has a sister, Rukula Bencion. His immediate family survived the Holocaust.

He began studying in 1939 in the Faculty of Economics at Belgrade University. He enrolled again in 1945 and, after graduating in 1949, worked in the Material Reserves Administration of the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia in the Regional People's Committee for Kosovo. He lived in Pristina until 1963 and was in charge of disbursing state investment funds. In 1963 the Federal Executive Council transferred him to the federal government where he worked as an advisor to the minister for foreign trade and as an assistant to the federal secretary for foreign trade in the presidency of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

Until 1963 he held the office of president of the Jewish Community in Pristina and received a great deal of recognition for his work.

Jewish families began arriving in Pristina from countries already under Nazi control in late 1939. There were women and children, along with the sick and the elderly, most of them from Austria, Poland and Germany. They were fleeing south in the hope of eventually reaching Palestine. About a hundred families reached Pristina, but the authorities

of the day could neither accommodate nor support them. So the families of the refugee Jews began finding places for them with members of the Pristina community who took them in and completely shared whatever they had with them. At that time the Pristina Jewish community numbered about eight hundred. Rabbi Josif Levi and the president of the Jewish Community, Haim David, gave a number of young people the job of greeting the refugees and finding accommodation for them. I was second in charge of a group for those Jews who wanted to reach Peć and Prizren and the Albanian border as I spoke excellent Albanian. I was a student at the time but had to interrupt my economics degree and return to Pristina after the *numerus clausus* legislation was implemented.

After the Germans entered the town in 1941, they rounded up all the Jews who had come from other countries, threw them into prison and then, several days later, took them away in trucks to an unknown destination. This was in mid-April. At the same time, perhaps a day or two later, Gestapo agents captured and imprisoned four Jews: Mušon Ašer and his son, Salomon, my merchant grandfather, Jakov Buhor Navon, and a grocer, David Mandil. Three of them were shot at the town's shooting range, but my grandfather Jakov was kept in prison because they wanted to get their hands on the family jewellery and money which they had heard about from some Balists from Pristina who knew about his assets.

Before these measures began, Jews from Belgrade had begun arriving in large numbers in Pristina, planning to continue southwards seeking refuge in the Italian occupied zone. Most of them were travelling with either fake documents or none at all.

It was in these circumstances that the general looting of Jewish property in Pristina began. With the help of the Gestapo, the Albanian Fascists broke into Jewish shops, harassing and beating Jews in order to humiliate those who remained and get rid of them. With the yellow stars on their chests, Jews became a target for anyone and could be killed without anyone having to answer for it.

Soon after the Germans entered Pristina in April 1941, we formed, under the guidance of Rabbi Josif Levi, an underground Jewish squad as resistance to the enemy. The aim of our activities was to help the elderly and sick members of the community and supply them with food and drugs. It wasn't long before our squad began distributing pamphlets urging resistance to the occupier. We did this on the orders of the town's resistance movement which controlled all the anti-Nazi and patriotic forces.

The original members of the squad were Rabbi Josif Levi, who led the group, David Ašerović, a student who was killed near Trieste in 1945, carpenter Baruh Baruh and schoolboy Žaki Rubenović, both of whom were killed in Berat in 1943 fighting the Germans, student Albert Ašerović, labourer Jakov Bahar, David Navon who was later captured and deported to Bergen-Belsen where he died, Salamon Salamon who today lives in Venezuela, the merchant Josif Salamon who survived the war and emigrated to Israel, student Gedalja Gidić and merchant Baruh Gidić, both of whom survived Bergen-Belsen and died in Israel, and myself, also a student. There were also three girls, Ruti, Meti and Luča who I think are no longer alive. Meti was a 1941 Partisan Award winner.

Independently of what we were doing, the Gestapo formed a labour gang of about 150 or 200 Jews who were sent to forced labour. We worked crushing and grinding stone near the old electric power station in one of the Pristina suburbs along the road to the cemetery. We worked twelve hours a day under the supervision of guards. We would assemble at six every morning outside the district headquarters. From there the guards would escort us to work. There were no breaks and each of us was obliged to provide his own food, mainly cold meals. Only the seriously ill or those over seventy years of age were exempted from work. The forced labour continued even after the Germans left at the end of May, 1941, when the territory fell under Italian occupation. Albanian pro-Fascist groups, the Balists and others, then took over the local government.

One day, it was the autumn of 1941 as far as I remember, I was taken from the building site with my hands tied, escorted by two policemen. They told me they were taking me to the Gestapo in the village of Miloševo for interrogation and execution. However, after I had waited for about two hours, the police chief interrogated me, enquired whether I was a Communist and then ordered the two policemen to return me to the building site. A few days later they led me away again, this time to the Questura, the Albanian police under the supervision of the German police, and then to prison. They put me in a cell with forty prisoners, most of them Serbs. There was barely room to sit and no toilet. After several days in this place with no water or sewerage, I was crawling with lice like the other prisoners. The Italian medical officer sprinkled us with some kind of powder every day until we got rid of this menace. We relieved ourselves in buckets in the cell and the unbearable stench settled everywhere. We were allowed into the prison yard only for an

hour's walking in the morning and were forbidden to speak to one another during this. The food was very poor: two pieces of bread with some kind of flavourless beans on a filthy metal plate. The whole time I was imprisoned I had no news about what was happening to my family and friends. Kemal-beg had gone out of his way to order all our property confiscated. The Balists came to our house with three trucks and Gestapo security. Although I was beaten and exhausted from my time in prison, I helped my father load our property from the cellar into the trucks. They left us with only four bundles of our belongings, telling us that we should take these with us when we were summoned.

From time to time the Balists and other pro-Nazi Albanian groups would come into the prison and, for no particular reason, beat the prisoners with a bullwhip. To this day I have the scars from this on my left arm and my head. My grandfather was kept in prison and asked for the gold with which the Navon family had conducted its business for four generations. Kemal-beg knew the extent of my grandfather's property and my grandfather was killed in prison after being stripped of his gold!

Even those Jews who were not in prison were living in difficult circumstances. A forced labour gang had been set up with our mothers and sisters, about forty of them. They had to clean the residences of the occupational authorities and some women were assigned to cleaning the streets and public toilets and were subjected to various forms of humiliation in the course of this. In general, there was nowhere for Jews in Kosovo to hide. They were persecuted by the Gestapo, the Balists and Mussolini's Black Shirts. The German command headquarters was in the village of Miloševo, about five or six kilometres from Pristina. Formally, the Italians were in power, but German guards and motorised police would circle the town incessantly.

At about the end of December, 1941, I was transferred to a prison in Tirana. I don't know who gave the order for this. I had no documents and was put in a cell with a Serb named Jezda. We were completely isolated and didn't know what was going on outside. No one asked me anything and no one talked about anything. I slept on a wooden bed with a blanket. The people working in the prison were mostly Italians and Balists.

Not long afterwards, in February, 1942, I was transferred to Elbasan, to the *casa dei prigioneri*, the prison house, under the supervision of the Italians and the Balists. We lived in uncertainty and fear, with no food and no medicines. There were a number of interned fami-

lies from Pristina there, including those of Gavriel Navon, Nisim Lazar, Mušon Navon, Ješua Navon, Salamon Lazar, Avram Baruh and Mordehaj Lazar.

At the end of August, 1943, after spending more than a year and a half in Elbasan, we fled to Mount Daiti, to the village of Shen Gjergj (St George). The capitulation of Italy was now in sight. All six families from Elbasan were living in strict isolation in barns in the village, with no possibility of making any sort of contact with the world outside. We were living without clothes, food or medicine, sleeping surrounded by cattle on planks and ferns or sheepskins. We collected snow overnight to melt for drinking water. There were two people helping us. The first was a local teacher named Elmaz Mema who knew who we were but pretended not to know anything. He would bring us food, cornbread and corn during the night and leave it at a place we agreed on. Sometimes we would also find a handful of beans. The other man who helped us was Gjafer the shepherd. The head of the household would also occasionally bring us some whey and cornbread. His name was Kaplan Bala.

While we were staying in the village we were aware that the Germans were constantly travelling along the road just a kilometre or two away. Fortunately they never came into the village, fearing they would run into Partisans on these hills where even mules could hardly keep their footing.

As time went by there were more and more aircraft flying overhead. These were the sign that the course of the war had changed. We guessed where the aircraft were flying to and lived in complete isolation and fear until April, 1945. Then Kaplan Bala gave us mules and, accompanied by his son, Destan, we rode down into Tirana. I remember that the snow had just begun to melt.

We reached our homes with the help of the Yugoslav military representative in Tirana, who gave us passes, and our friend Sheab Topuli who took us to Struga. We then travelled by train to Uroševac and on to Pristina by horse and cart.

There were people living in our house, but these unknown tenants quickly moved out and we moved back in. The house was empty, but we were home nonetheless. Everyone was in a poor state: my mother and sister had Graves' disease, my father had a spinal injury and I had a pulmonary abscess, typhus and rheumatism. And thus began our lives in the liberated country.